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ABSTRACT

Clinical psychologists have traditionally shared the results of psychological tests with other professionals but have withheld this information from their clients. Thus, clients have been encouraged to rely on experts without taking an active part in their treatment. To determine whether college students could validate the accuracy of their own personality test results, 47 students were asked to evaluate the accuracy of the computerized interpretations of Personality Research Form (PRF) tests that they had completed 2 weeks earlier. Significant correlations were found between standard scores and accuracy ratings of the students' Self Rating Scales for 26 of 28 predicted relationships. The findings suggest that college students are able to assist in the validation of their own personality test results. (Author/JAC)

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SELF-VALIDATION OF COMPUTERIZED PERSONALITY DESCRIPTIONS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA, March 24-27, 1982.

Abstract. The present study was conducted to determine whether college students can validate the accuracy of their own personality test results. A total of 38 female and 9 male undergraduates completed Jackson's (1967) Personality Research Form (PRF) in a regular class session. Two weeks later all students were asked to evaluate the accuracy of personality descriptions by completing a five-point rating scale for each PRF trait. Finally, after another week all participants were provided with computerized interpretations of their own PRF results and the opportunity of discussing these findings with an experienced counselor. Significant or highly significant correlations were found between standard scores on the PRF and accuracy ratings for 26 of 28 predicted relationships. It was concluded that college students are able to assist in the validation of their own personality test results.

Clinical psychologists have traditionally shared the results and interpretations of psychological test procedures with other mental health professionals and have withheld this information, by one means or another from their clients, who may have spent much time and money in taking the tests (Hammond, 1953; Fischer, 1972; Tallent, 1976; Wright, 1981). Specifically, individuals who consult clinical psychologists have often been given the same general treatment as medical patients. They are frequently kept in the dark about the diagnostic and treatment procedures applied to them. More importantly clients are encouraged to rely on the judgment of experts, even when they are themselves quite capable of taking a more active part in the treatment process

A major justification for this questionable practice has been the claim that the direct communication of test results to laymen could lead to psychological damage. For example, Hills and Williams (1965) found that the communication of educational and vocational test results to college students, which was dissonant with the clients' "preconceived notions" of themselves, sharply reduced their self-esteem. Similarly,

Fiske reported that (1956):

> . . . regardless of the type of test, as the significance of the test results to the individual increased, the greater was the negative reaction to feedback not coinciding with the examinee's belief about himself. (p. 45)

Of course, it stands to reason that the reported "negative reactions" do not necessarily have to damage the individual psychologically. Even very disturbed patients can tolerate a great deal more information about themselves than is generally recognized and such information may even result in positive therapeutic change (Richman, 1967). The same point was made by Freud in his 1905 essay, "On Psychotherapy." According to this view therapists should not:

> . . . ever fear that a patient will be harmed by the shock accompanying the introduction of the unconscious into consciousness. . . you can convince yourself theoretically that the somatic and emotional effect of an impulse that has become conscious can never be so powerful as that of the unconscious one. It is only by the application of our highest mental energies which are bound up with consciousness, that we command all our impulses. (p. 72)

Addressing themselves to the potential impact of their computerized MMPI reports on the patients themselves, Pearson and Swenson make a similar point (1967):

> In general, the MMPI constitutes a self-appraisal or self-assessment largely based on items whose content is rather obvious. The patient who attains a markedly elevated profile which generates some uncomplimentary terms in the computer printout almost invariably has admitted to some undesirable traits, symptoms and experiences. And the patient knows it. He is rarely surprised or angered by anything conveyed in the report. (p. 30)

Flook and Saggar (1968) empirically supported the view that the communication of psychological test results is not harmful and may

actually be beneficial. A group of English college students received detailed information about their performance on standard tests of aptitude, intelligence and personality before the end-of-school-year examinations. Students who obtained feedback scored significantly

Psychological test results have also been withheld from clients on the claim that laymen are generally incapable of discriminating between valid and invalid descriptions of their personality (Dies, 1972; Forer, 1949; Krueger & Zietz, 1933; Manning, 1968; Odell, 1972; Rosen, 1975; Snyder & Shenkel, 1975; Stagner, 1958; Ulrich, Stachnick & Stainton, 1963). Participants were asked to complete a standard psychological test and promised that they would afterwards receive a summary and interpretation of their own test results. Actually, however, the test interpretations were the same for everyone. Moreover, the feedback was formulated in very general and socially desirable terms. Since the subjects rated the bogus personality descriptions as accurate, the investigators concluded that personal or self-validation is a fallacious procedure and that the public is "gullible" with regards to psychological test procedures and their results.

The traditional use of concealment and deception in self-validation research raises important ethical questions. According to the latest revision of the "Ethical Principles for Psychologists" (APA, 1981), deception should only be used if ". . . the use of such techniques is justified by the study's prospective scientific, educational or applied value. . ." and, more importantly, if no ". . . alternative procedures are available. . ." (p. 638). It is our conviction that self-validation can be studied without the application of deceptive research procedures. Specifically, we believe that a person's ability to validate the accuracy of test results cannot be determined if these results have never been communicated to the individual in the first place.

In addition, Meehl (1956) has stressed that universally-valid personality descriptions are likely to be endorsed by almost everyone because of their high base rate validity. Thus, the individuals, who received the bogus personality descriptions, were not particularly

gullible; they correctly accepted feedback which applied to most people, and hence, to themselves. The same point was made by Odell in a validation study of his computer program for the interpretation of the Sixteen PF Test (1972):

> There can be little doubt that the Barnum effect statements, because of their extremely high base rate, should apply very accurately to everyone. Hence, they should be perceived as more accurate than statements constructed from less accurate test scores by an admittedly less than perfect interpretation program. (p. 273)

Donceel, Alamina & Birch (1949) and Layne (1978, 1979, 1980) have suggested that clients may also have accepted bogus personality descriptions as valid because they came from a prestigious source and a recent review of the literature on the P. T. Barnum effect provides additional support for this reinterpretation (Snyder, Shenkel & Lowrey, 1977).

The present investigation sought to overcome the shortcomings of previous research on the personal validation problem by introducing a number of important procedural changes. First, all subjects were provided with comprehensive personality descriptions derived from their test results. These feedback statements were written to minimize the potential influence of the social desirability bias. Lastly, participants were urged to critically evaluate the accuracy of all personality descriptions given to them.

Method

Subjects. The sample consisted of 38 females and 9 males who were enrolled in a first course in Abnormal Psychology at the University of South Alabama during the 1980-1981 academic year. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 45 years and all were volunteers.

Instruments. Jackson's Personality Research Form (PRF) was chosen as test instrument because of its excellent psychometric qualities and, especially, its control of the social desirability bias (Jackson, 1967).

In addition, a Self Rating Scale (SRS) was developed which consisted of 28 descriptions for high and low scores on the 14 clinical

scales of the PRF. These personality descriptions were adapted from a PRF interpretation program employed in a series of previous feedback studies (Balance & Bringmann, 1971; Balance, Bringmann & Lenaars, 1982). The SRS presented the descriptions in random order and a five-point rating scale extending from "very accurate" to "very inaccurate" was printed after each personality sketch.

Procedures. All subjects completed a short form (A or B) of the PRF during a regular class session. Two weeks later each participant was asked to complete the Self Rating Scale. Finally, all subjects received a computer printout of test interpretations for their own highest and lowest PRF scores. All subjects were also given the opportunity of discussing their test results with an experienced counselor.

Statistics. The PRF answer sheets were handscored. Raw scores for all PRF scales were converted to standard scores (Jackson, 1967, pp. 9-10). Next, Pearson's rs were computed between PRF standard scores and the accuracy ratings for all 28 comparisons.

Hypotheses. The following predictions were made: (1) significant positive correlations will be found between standard scores on the PRF and the accuracy ratings of personality descriptions for high scores on the respective scales, and (2) significant negative correlations will be found between standard scores on the PRF and accuracy ratings of personality descriptions for low scores on the respective scales.

Results.

Relevant Pearson Product Moment Correlations between PRF standard scores and self ratings are presented in Table 1. The predicted positive correlations were found for 13 or 14 possible high score descriptions. Twelve of these correlations were significant at the p .01 level. Individual correlations ranged from .19 (Autonomy) to .75 (Exhibition) with a mean of .53. Significant negative correlations coefficients were obtained (p .05) for 13 of 14 possible low score descriptions. Again, twelve of these correlations were significant at the p .01 level. The lowest correlation

Insert Table 1 About Here

coefficient was obtained for the description of the Aggression scale (r = .24) and the highest coefficient was recorded for the Endurance scale (r = .71). The mean correlation coefficient for all scale descriptions was -.48. On the basis of these results it was concluded that both predictions of this study had been confirmed and that college students can indeed validate their own personality test results.

Table 1

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficients (r) Between PRF Standard Scores and Self Rating Scores

PRF Scales	Scale Descriptions	
	High Scores	Low Scores
Achievement	.51**	-.44**
Affiliation	.40**	-.29**
Aggression	.40**	-.24
Autonomy	.19	-.39**
Dominance	.71**	-.51**
Endurance	.66**	-.71**
Exhibition	.72**	-.55**
Harm Avoidance	.54**	-.50**
Impulsivity	.33*	-.63**
Nurturance	.49**	-.47**
Order	.70**	-.65**
Play	.46**	-.42**
Social Recognition	.66**	-.48**
Understanding	.60**	-.47**

*p .05

**p .01

Discussion

The present research agrees with the results of several previous studies (Balance, Sandberg & Bringmann, 1971; Bringmann, Balance & Sandberg, 1971; Burdsahl & Schwartz, 1975; Leenaars, 1976; Leenaars, Bringmann & Balance, 1978; Trusler, 1976) which have demonstrated that college students do possess a significant self-validational ability. However, our results contrast sharply with the previously mentioned studies of the personal or self-validation problem (Dies, 1972; Forer, 1949; Krueger & Zietz, 1933; Manning, 1968; Odell, 1972; Rosen, 1975; Snyder & Shenkel, 1975; Stagner, 1958; Ulrich, Stachnick & Stainton, 1963).

We believe that it is essential for psychologists to make use of an individual's self-validation ability in the assessment process. The theoretical basis of our position derives in part from the work of Constance Fischer, the existential psychologist at Duquesne University. She has stressed that the client's perceptions and conceptions of reality are important, because they provide the necessary context for evaluating the client's motivation and behavior. Fischer believes that the client should be regarded as a "co-evaluator," who assists the professional (1970):

> The client can be reached most readily through an understanding of his world, rather than through pre-existing theoretical formulations. There is then, no need for secrecy from the client. Indeed, in some ways he is the best judge of the report's accuracy. (p. 5)

The authors fully endorse Fischer's viewpoint. Jane Duckworth expresses similar thoughts in her recent MMPI manual (1979):

> Frequently, as the test interpreter, you can arrive at some generalities about the client and the client's behavior, but the client must be given an opportunity to provide the specifics. . . . When several likely interpretations for an elevated score exist, explain to the client that more than one possibility exists and allow the client to sort out which interpretation is the most valid. (pp. 280-281)

The practice of sharing psycholgoical test results directly with clients may also improve the public relations problems of psychologists because clients who are fully informed about relevant test results recommendations are likely to be less resentful and to feel less exploited (Balance, Sandberg & Bringmann, 1971). The communication of test results to patients can even reduce the likelihood of being used for malpractice (Wright, 1981):

> . . .in a substantial number of cases the psychologist (sued for malpractice) really failed to communicate fully to the client the nature and extent of the psychological evaluation experience and/or the psychologist poorly handled aspects of it--that is, the client was really not fully informed. Psychologists should not forget that the individual being evaluated has as much right to a complete discussion of findings and recommendations as does the individual or agency paying for the psychologist's services. (p. 21)

Finally, sharing psychological results with clients is clearly required by the Ethical Principles of the American Psychological Association which urges members to (1981):

> . . .respect the client's right to know the results, the interpretations made, and the bases for the conclusions and recommendations. . . . In using assessment techniques, psychologists respect the right of clients to have full explanations of the nature and the purpose of their techniques in language they can understand, unless a specific exception to this right has been agreed upon in advance. (p. 637)

In conclusion, the authors believe that the psychological community does not have to be unduly afraid to carefully disclose the results of psychological evaluations. Most individuals are remarkably able to accept and validate even painful psychological information about themselves. There is no evidence that such disclosures are harmful and it is likely that learning more about oneself may even result in positive therapeutic change.

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